

# Another wildland fire season is fast approaching

by Doug Newbould

I was looking out my window early this week, contemplating the gray skies and all of the snow piled up in my yard, and watching the water dripping from the eaves. Breakup can be rather dreary if you ask me. Winter does not seem to want to release its grip on the Kenai. But the telltale signs of spring are also visible. The woodpeckers are back and there are a few more songbirds at the feeder than there were two weeks ago. The doggy footprints on the linoleum are no longer just wet, and the buds on the birch and alder have that plump, ready-to-burst look.

Despite the lingering symptoms of winter, I know that another fire season is almost upon us. The seasonal firefighters are coming on board, taking their fireline safety refresher training and getting ready for the physical fitness test, preparing the engines, pumps and saws for that first fire call. And this is the time of year when the prognosticators are making their predictions about the kind of fire season we're going to have in 2006.

Prognosticators can be classified in three groups: scientists, professionals and laymen (or laywomen). Yesterday I pulled up the National Wildland Fire Outlook from the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC)—Predictive Services Group, on the web. These are the professional prognosticators. They predict, "Fire potential is expected to be significantly higher than normal across most of the Southwest, the south half of Southern California, and portions of Texas, Oklahoma, Florida, Missouri and Alaska for the following reasons:" And the reason they include Alaska in their list is: "A forecasted warm spring and an earlier than normal snowmelt will contribute to elevated fire potential in Alaska."

In their geographic area discussions, the NIFC folks talk about the elevated fire potential in the interior of Alaska "based on below normal precipitation to date and warmer than normal temperatures leading to an early snowmelt. The Kenai Peninsula has significant areas of bug-killed spruce and continues to be an area of concern with higher than normal fire potential."

They basically made the same statement about the Kenai last year, attributing increased fire potential to our hazard fuels problem and low snow pack. And yes,

I guess we can say the professionals got it right last year—at least partially. We had our most significant fire season since 1969. What they did not predict was the lightning we experienced. And to be fair, I don't know how they could have. We have no record of such a lightning season on the Kenai. They also didn't predict Alaska would see its third highest acreage burned total last year.

I also read a news article last month quoting a member of the scientific community, Dr. Glenn Juday from UAF. His prognostication is that Alaska will experience another warm dry summer and increased potential for wildfire. His prediction was based upon the sunspot cycle and its effects upon global weather.

As for the lay community, I have heard very little predicting this year. We had very little snow through most of the winter, then a significant amount of moisture in late February and March. What will April bring? I heard from one of my fellow Fire Management Officers yesterday that the La Nina in the equatorial Pacific would change our weather pattern from what we experienced last year.

So what is my prediction for the 2006 fire season on the western Kenai? After almost fifteen years here, I can honestly say, I have no idea! What I have learned is that we fire managers have to be ready for anything. Every year is unique and even though there are predictable cycles in nature, the Alaskan climate seems to be changing beyond the capabilities of our brave prognosticators.

While I have your attention, I would like to invite you to a couple of events this month. The first is a public meeting, tonight (April 7<sup>th</sup>) at 7:00 pm at the Kenai River Center on Funny River Road, across from the Soldotna Airport. This meeting, hosted by the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, is to discuss proposed prescribed fire projects on the refuge.

A second event is a new opportunity for Peninsula residents to get Fire Corps training. Fire Corps is a member of the Citizen Corps family of programs that provide individuals and communities training and support in emergency preparedness and response. The training is free, from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm at the Kenai River Center on Saturday, April 15<sup>th</sup>. I hope to see you

at both events, and let's get ready for another fire season, whatever it will be.

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